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ABSTRACT

The central role of writing in Kentucky's Education Reform Act is most evident in Kentucky's new assessment system, which employs writing on all levels. Even tests that have recently included multiple-choice items may be replaced by response items that require students to apply knowledge, concepts, and skills in a writing format. Writing itself is being assessed through a portfolio system, whereby students are required to prepare and revise a collection of their best work to be presented for evaluation by a team of scorers. Portfolios must include a table of contents, a letter to the reviewer, a personal essay of some kind, and three pieces of an analytical nature. To measure the consequences of this new emphasis in writing across the curriculum for higher education, especially college-level writing, a survey was conducted. Questionnaires were sent to 41 directors of composition and department chairs of Kentucky's post-secondary public and private institutions; 13 were returned. The survey focused on two areas relating to the reform act: (1) the use of portfolios for placement, instruction and assessment; and (2) changes in the preparation of freshman composition students. The results showed reason for caution. A small majority attributed positive changes to the reform act; others were not willing to note such changes because of a lack of evidence. They were somewhat skeptical because of the reform act's utilitarian agenda, its implicit demand that teachers conform to the needs of the corporate culture, and the difficulty of scoring a large number of portfolios in a limited amount of time. (TB)

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The Impact of Kentucky's Educational Reform Act on Writing throughout the Commonwealth

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In 1990, by requirement of its highest court, Kentucky began a comprehensive transformation of its educational system. Described by PBS in *America's Educational Revolution: A Report from the Frontline* (aired April 23, 1993) as "the largest and most radical school reform" effort in the nation to date, Kentucky's Educational Reform Act (KERA) has dramatically affected curriculum, assessment, teaching practices, and even school structure and scheduling. In this transformation, writing has played a central role—both in curriculum and assessment. All forms of Kentucky's new assessment system, which documents student and school progress, require students to write—and to write well. Indeed, an estimated eighty percent of the assessment overall is based upon students' writing.

If, as U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley has said, Kentucky's reform is "a lighthouse for the rest of the nation" (qtd. *Kentucky Teacher*, February 1994), then information about the reform and the role of writing in this reform deserves attention. Furthermore, though KERA applies to the K - 12 system, what happens in that system clearly will influence higher education. Though recognizing that the reform is still in progress, we offer information about writing in Kentucky's educational reform at present and discuss some of the impact on writing throughout the commonwealth.

Writing and Assessment

The central role of writing in KERA is most evident in Kentucky's new assessment system. The assessment, designed in Kentucky with strong influence from teachers, follows Kentucky's outcome-based educational philosophy and emphasis on students' ability to demonstrate in alternate forms of testing that they know and can do what Kentucky's new Learning Goals and Academic Expectations require. Three forms of testing now are in place: Transitional Tests (Open Response), grades 4, 8, and 11; Performance Events, grades 4, 8, and 11; and Portfolios, grades 4, 5 (math), 8, and 12. In each form of testing, students must write, and an interdisciplinary writing portfolio focuses specifically upon writing.

Although past Transitional Tests have included multiple-choice items, plans are to phase out these items and rely upon open-response items that require students to *apply* knowledge, concepts, and skills. For example, one released open-response item presents a pie graph that indicates different percentages of income for a budget. Students are to analyze the budget and write to explain how they would modify it in order to purchase a car. For open-response tests in all study areas, students must do far more than choose a best answer or complete one-sentence answers. They must write. As a result, many teachers now require more writing, including such practices as learning logs and response journals, to help students learn and prepare for open-response tests.

Performance events present students with some task that requires them to demonstrate that they can apply information, skills, and core concepts. Students might, for example, be given a task to analyze a liquid (materials and such are provided) and to write about their findings or about the processes they followed. Though some performance tasks require students to work collaboratively, individual performance also is tested. Test makers develop tasks to address the Learner Goals and Academic Expectations, and these tasks also address realistic or "authentic" situations and problems students will face in the workplace and in their personal lives. For these assessment tasks in all study areas, writing often is the means by which students demonstrate what they know and can do.

Portfolios

Kentucky has made a major commitment to portfolio assessment, including a writing portfolio. Working with a consulting firm, Advanced Systems, located in New Hampshire, the Kentucky Department of Education and teachers across the commonwealth designed the portfolio system that requires students to collect a variety of samples of their writing, with representation from different study areas.

Six samples are required from each student. The overall expectation for all Kentucky schools is that students will write with a variety of purposes in a variety of forms for a variety of audiences. Though assessment portfolios are collected at targeted grades, working portfolios are maintained at other grades as well and in some districts are passed from grade to grade. Here, for example, are the requirements for a portfolio submitted by a grade-twelve student:

- Table of Contents including description of each entry, the study area for which it is written, and the page number in the portfolio.
- Letter to Reviewer in which the student analyzes himself/herself as a writer and reflects on the pieces in the portfolio.
- One of the following:
  a. Personal Narrative
  b. Memoir
  c. Personal Essay
  - or -
  d. Personal Vignette
- One Short Story, Poem, or Play/Script

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- Three pieces, each of which will achieve one or more of these purposes:
  a. Predict an Outcome
  b. Defend a Position
  c. Analyze or Evaluate a Situation, Person, Place, or Thing
  d. Solve a Problem
  e. Explain a Process or Concept
  f. Draw a Conclusion
  g. Create a Model

Designing and implementing the scoring process for writing portfolios have been major endeavors. Last year, 137,561 writing portfolios were scored, involving teachers throughout the state. The assessment includes the following:

- collection of samples at targeted grade levels
- a Scoring Guide that indicates criteria and performance levels
- sets of Benchmarks for the four performance levels
- a holistic scoring process using trained scorers
- a series of consistency checks by Kentucky teachers and outside scorers
- reports to improve instruction and performance

Overall reliability of the assessment system, of course, is a concern. A perfect reliability index is 1. Kentucky's goal is .90 for school-level data. For 1991 - 92, reliability measures were between .85 and .90. For 1992- 93, at all grade levels, results exceeded .90 (Kentucky Department of Education, *Kentucky Teacher*, August 1994). Scores of assessment portfolios are reported to schools to improve instruction, student performance, and school accountability. Indeed, "sanctions and rewards," including money for schools, are determined in part by these scores. The role of writing in Kentucky's schools is an important one for all teachers and administrators.

In addition to providing scoring criteria, instructional analysis and other information, the Holistic Scoring Guide describes four levels of performance: novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished. The most recent results of scoring (Figure 1) indicate that standards are high, and though educators would be delighted if many students demonstrated a "distinguished" level of performance, few students reach this level.

Although many students still perform at or below the Apprentice level in writing, increases at the Proficient level for the writing portfolio are encouraging. Since writing plays a key role in all forms of assessment, overall trends deserve attention. Thomas Boysen, Commissioner of Education, reports that "The trend data from 1992 to 1993 showed an 8 percent increase in student achievement in reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies" (Kentucky Department of Education, "Measuring Up," 1994).

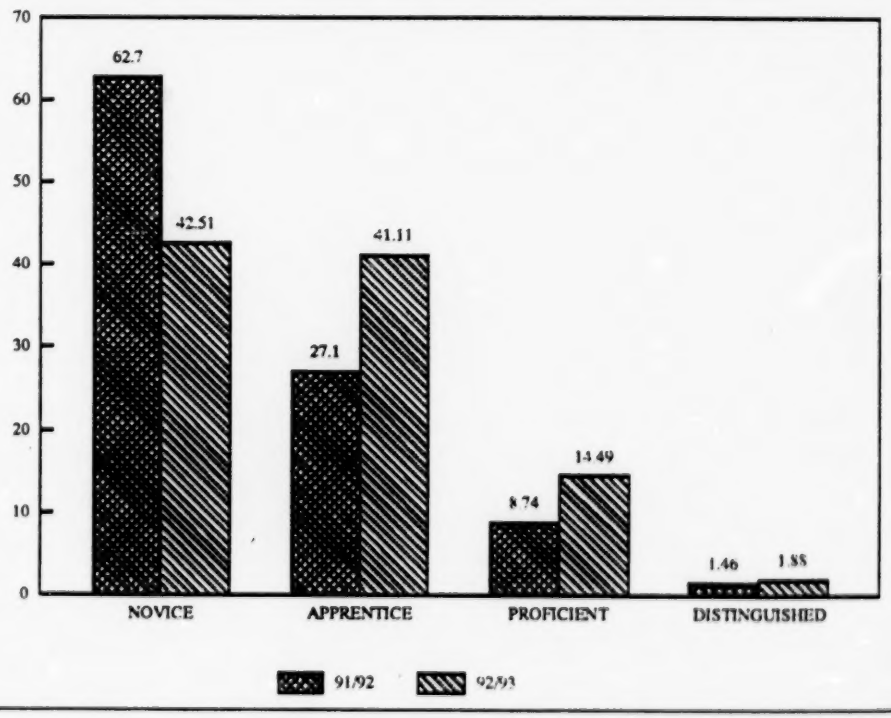
The impact of the role of writing in the new assessment in Kentucky has been strong, including writing across the curriculum; portfolios at elementary, middle, and secondary grades; increased staff development for teachers to help them use and score writing; integration of writing and learning; and gradual improvement in writing and in learning. If these trends continue, what are the consequences for higher education, especially college-level writing programs?

The Results of a Survey

To help answer this question we mailed in the Fall of 1993 a survey to all composition directors and department chairs at 41 of Kentucky's post-secondary public and private institutions; 13 were returned. The survey focused on two areas relating to KERA: (A) the use of portfolios for placement, instruction and assessment, and (B) changes in the preparation of freshman composition students.

Figure 1.
Assessment of Portfolios, 1991-92 and 1992-93

(Pre-audit averages of grades 4, 8, 12.
Source: Kentucky Department of Education, Division of Assessment Implementation, 10-28-94.)



The results provided an opportunity to reflect on school reform in general and on the impact of KERA's reforms for writing instruction in particular.

Reasons for caution

The respondents were cautious in estimating the effects of KERA on their incoming freshmen. A small majority attributed positive changes to KERA—more experience with writing, writing across the curriculum, and group work. Others did not note such changes or were not willing to attribute them to KERA because of lack of evidence. Nor were any changes in their departments attributable to KERA; many respondents said what they already do will work on incoming students. The survey revealed that less than twenty-five percent of respondents use portfolios, only for instruction; no respondent indicated departmental use of portfolios for assessment. The generally positive view of KERA was tempered; in several cases, respondents perceived the following as problems:

- large classes
- the high cost for training and implementing programs
- confusion about standards
- heavy teaching loads
- lack of training
- lack of time to practice before the big pay-off assessments

In addition, since KERA's portfolio assessment of graduating seniors is not available for admission purposes, universities have not been able to use these scores for placing students in appropriate writing courses. Considering such problems, academics have two good reasons to be cautious about KERA's impact, both of which came out in follow-up interviews with selected respondents. The first concerns the pragmatic difficulty of translating plans for reform in to teaching, learning and assessment practices. The second has to do with what one respondent called KERA's "utilitarian agenda" and its attempts to bridge gaps between school and the workplace.

As several people pointed out in their responses, KERA advocates many of the suggestions that composition teachers and researchers have been making in their journal articles, conference papers, and workshops for years: use more group work, practice writing more frequently and in more varied settings, give tasks that more closely resemble those of workers. By means of feedback from the K-12 system, academics now get to see how these suggestions work on a large scale in real schools with thousands of real students. That translation should be reason for concern in itself because no curriculum can be teacher-proof, that is, immune to alterations. When actual human beings try to put the profession's brilliant ideas on how to teach into practice, they interpret, reacting to local conditions and specific classroom dynamics, and, for better or worse, change these ideas. Such distortion in implementing reform is inevitable.

The second reason to be cautious, some say, is KERA's emphasis to better prepare students for the workplace. The benefits of Kentucky's reform are tempered, some academics contend, by the need to question KERA's apparent messages that students and teachers conform to the values and expectations of corporate cultures, that is, to the tenets of corporate capitalism.

The assumption that what works at one level of schooling will work at other levels also needs to be interrogated. It seems reasonable to assume, for example, that since college students collaborate successfully, so too, can primary and middle schoolers. What students collaborate on and how they collaborate may be different at different levels, however, different enough to render comparisons, and translations, difficult. Furthermore, what works for K-12 teachers may not work for postsecondary educators. For some respondents this assumption, that schools, colleges, and the workplace should become one seamless system—decontextualized, ahistorical, universalistic—presents the biggest obstacle to the successful impact of KERA in post-secondary education. It is not only impossible but questionable to try to create such a seamless system.

Still, all the respondents found something to be happy with, and none predicted that students would be getting worse. Certainly, strengthening the connections among the public school system, the higher education system, and the needs of employers has many benefits for students and employers. Under the terms of state budgeting for higher education, colleges and universities also benefit to the extent that they can turn out students that employers find satisfactory. This is a very attractive situation for many people, especially in light of budget shortages for the past several years and the foreseeable future. Whether this approach to coordinating schools and job markets will lead to better writing or simply to a new set of literate activities subordinated to corporate interests, or some odd mixture of both, remains to be seen.

Portfolios at Eastern Kentucky University

Even prior to KERA's initiatives, our faculty recognized a need to improve how students write and initiated some changes similar to those advocated by KERA. The need for such change is indicated inasmuch as one out of four students cannot satisfy a junior-level writing requirement. For some this failure rate is a mark of rising standards at the university; for others it is a sign that the university is not doing a good job in teaching writing. However one interprets the results, it is still apparent that many students need to improve their writing ability. KERA's emphasis on the need for change to improve writing should be continued in post-secondary education.

Although thankful for KERA's emphasis on writing, we have come to realize that it is difficult to respond with significant change at a regional university. Predictably, some faculty see any intrusion into their classrooms as an invasion of their academic freedom. Moreover, assessments (no matter what the instruments—portfolios or otherwise) can always be perceived as problematic. However, our university has been able to establish new directions, some reform, better pedagogies, and the possibility of more reliable assessments.

Three years ago, we began our Pilot Portfolio Project which has led to a revision of syllabi and related classroom instruction. Using KERA's 12th grade portfolio as a base, we have constructed our freshman writing program so that it takes advantage of the benefits of portfolio-based instruction. Our students now write for purposes similar to those required by KERA. Students present three finished pieces of their best work; they prepare the presentation of these pieces with a letter of reflection. The change for students is not as great as that experienced by our instructors, most of whom are new to portfolio-driven instruction. Here, for example, are comments from one instructor describing the changes that have taken place within his classroom:

My perception is that the KERA-inspired portfolio method

of teaching composition has transformed traditional pedagogy in a fundamental way. Before portfolio[s] I was, I believe, a by-the-book sort of teacher who allowed the textbook arrangement of subject matter to lead me in the sequence of assignments and topics discussed in class. Admittedly this procedure was not the most imaginative and it often resulted in my hiding behind the textbook arrangement and explanation of the subject matter, depending upon it for my authority (or part of it), and being blinded to other avenues of approaching the topic at hand. In contrast, the portfolio approach does not permit me the luxury of such defenses, dependencies, or blindness because, for better or worse, I have to come to grips with the elements of the lesson the students don't grasp immediately.

Formerly it was relatively easy for students themselves to use [this way of teaching] as an insuperable formality and a shield between the teacher and themselves. Now we all work more as equals at a process, at mastering a skill than we did before. I am not saddled with the burden of infallibility and am free to admit that I am still learning to write, too—as I assume we all are.

The portfolio method allows the teacher to respond to individual needs as well as to the class as a whole and to keep a better balance in so doing than the prior traditional approach afforded.

This response is typical of those made by our writing instructors, and we have had some success in turning our program toward a wide-spread use of portfolios. But again, what's important is that this movement toward more use of portfolios is both in response to KERA and to recommendations of the profession nationally.

KERA asks that we rethink large-scale assessments of student writing. To this end we also are seeking ways to develop a local, valid, and reliable instrument for students, instructors, and department evaluations. Yet we have a problem. We realize that our current end-of-the-semester proficiency essay examination, even when graded holistically, carries all of the liabilities of a single instrument barrier/gateway examination. Regardless of our sympathy for portfolios, we have not figured out how to assess 2000 portfolios at the end of a semester. Unlike our colleagues in Kentucky's high schools, we do not have the benefit of collecting portfolios in February and scoring them during the months that follow. Our registrar requires that we have all grades in before the semester ends. Is it possible to score 2000 portfolios within a very short period of time? We hope so. If, however, some reasonably quick method of assessing portfolios is not possible, the use of portfolios may be difficult to sustain. Nevertheless, following KERA's lead, we are convinced that we want to encourage the use of portfolios.

KERA has indeed been an agent of transformation, leading students to write more effectively. Kentucky's reform demands that its educators and students commit themselves to higher, measurable outcomes, showing through performance that students are in fact prepared for personal and vocational success. To what degree such reforms should and can influence Kentucky's college and university instruction is a question academics continue to raise even as they take heart in what has already been accomplished.

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David Elias coordinates the developmental English programs at EKU. He has taught writing to lawyers, engineers, computer scientists, medical researchers, and other working people.

Charles Whitaker is Director of the Eastern Kentucky Writing Project. He has conducted over a hundred KERA workshops for teachers to help them write and teach writing.